

Matthew Sanford: Pursuing the Mind-Body Connection



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Matthew Sanford was in a car accident when he was 13. Among other injuries, he suffered spinal cord damage that paralyzed his body from the chest down. "It took me many years of trying to overcome my paralyzed body, to drag it through my life, before I started to practice yoga. I didn't start yoga until I was 25 and I am now 41," he says in a USINFO webchat (<http://usinfo.state.gov/usinfo/Archive/2006/Nov/27-625204.html>). Sanford teaches yoga at the Minnetonka, Minnesota-based Mind Body Solutions and his approach is to "spread my presence throughout my body regardless of whether I can flex muscles. There are connections between mind and body that are more subtle, more quiet but are crucial for people living with disabilities."

How do you teach yoga, a very physical exercise, to those who don't share the same physical disabilities?

Yoga is a phenomenon that occurs at the intersection of the mind's intent and the body's limits. That means that principles of yoga do not discriminate—they can travel through any body. Not every one's poses will look the same, but at core the spine is waking, regardless of disability.

If you think of the instructions of yoga as efficient ways of spreading presence through the body, then it becomes more clear how it is possible.

What is the difference between Indian traditional yoga vs. modern day yoga?

A short answer is the type of yoga that I study originates in Pune, India from yoga master B.K.S. Iyengar.

But traditional Indian yoga is deeply embedded in the Hindu religion. Modern day yoga, I believe, does not have the same religious undercurrents. At least in the U.S., it is a profound means of integrating mind, body and spirit. This integration makes the practitioner more present and thus can add depth to whatever his or her particular beliefs are.

My work does not just focus on yoga. We do work within rehabilitation practices, delivery of health care, even managing stress in the workplace. The tagline is simply that minds and bodies work better together. I believe this is especially an important truth for people living with disabilities. So often we are encouraged to overcome our bodies and try to fit into life as if we were not different. I think this is a mistake.

How has your work helped corporations? Is yoga the key to improving efficiency among lackadaisical workers?

It does not have to be yoga. The work that most of us are doing is not like physics, nor are most of us lifting thousands of pounds per day. What is happening is that the way we are working is dulling the mind-body relationship. Not only

does this make for a lackadaisical workforce, but it contributes to rising health care costs. We need to realize that presence within the body is an under-utilized asset. That living more vibrantly through the whole body, even while working, helps deepen one's sense of well being. Presence within the body also helps the clarity of one's thought process and on and on.

Have you had to deal much with discrimination?

With regard to just living with a disability within the U.S. culture, I would say I have experienced my share. With regards to yoga, I find that people are a little incredulous when they find out that I teach yoga. But all it takes is them being in my class a little while.

But generally, I find that people mean well and most have good hearts. They might limit me with their judgments but that is a fact about them, not about me.

What is Iyengar yoga?

It emphasizes alignment and precision within each individual pose. It uses props to aid practitioners with more difficult mind-body relationships. It breaks the poses down into parts more. All of this leads to it being the best method for someone to practice if they live with a disability.

I want to know more about bed sores. Would yoga help me with this?

Once you have a bed sore, the

best way for it to heal is to relieve the pressure. In general, however, yoga can improve the quality of your skin at a systemic level. It can help you feel generally more healthy. It also will make you more aware of body positions and the need to move and change position. This of course will help you prevent sores from forming.

What inspired you to begin yoga after living so long as a paraplegic?

I missed my body. I had given more of me than I needed to.

It is possible to be present within the body without flexing muscles and I set off to explore that truth. There is freedom that comes with being more present within the body rather than less. This truth has kept me practicing all these years.

I think any kind of social support is not enough for a disabled person. Though people are good-hearted, they are not able to understand exactly what a disabled person wants. But a kind wife, or parents, share a big part in their life. I wanted to ask: Are you married? And do you think your wife has helped you in your successful life? I (as a disabled man) want to say how thankful I am to my wife.

I am married. I also have a son. He is 6. I have had very supporting friends and family. Trauma and disability do not just happen to one person, nor even to one family, but to a whole community. I, too, am grateful for all the support I have received.

